

Reading the rereadings: Valerie Walkerdine responds to the commentaries on 'Video Replay': An e-interview with Corinne Squire

CS: 'Video Replay' was a much-cited and commented-on paper when it appeared and in subsequent years. How do you yourself see its effects in film theory, cultural theory and psychology?

VW: This is such an interesting question. What I most remember is a series of comments, suggesting my approach was 'narcissistic' and 'navel gazing', which Sue and Candy also mention. It did cause quite a stir in media studies and as you point out, it was the first attempt to engage with the audience in this way. I was absolutely convinced that what I was trying to do was important because it worked with attempts to understand the dynamics of audience response and the relation of those to the observer and to the researcher's own subjectivity. It thus foregrounded issues of psychical reality, of unconscious processes and of what we would now call psychosocial processes. But at the time, the kind of psychoanalysis being used in relation to media studies was Lacanian, Althusser was important, and no-one looked at modes of audience engagement with film or television using psychoanalysis in this way. The field was quite split between people using psychoanalysis **to analyse** film as text and making assumptions about the kind of subject created within a film, and **people who were** rather profoundly anti-psychoanalytic and **who** used ideas of an active audience making cultural readings. No-one had really gone beyond this rather sterile dichotomy.

When you ask what effect this has had on the field, I am truly not sure. Certainly there are now more people interested in this approach to audiences. And this work was particularly taken up by women, so it had an impact within feminism. I think the whole climate has now changed, however. The 'turn to affect' and the engagement with embodiment has meant that there is much more openness to this kind of approach than hitherto. However, within media studies, the turn to affect is often interpreted in a way which still makes the kind of work I was trying to do innovative. A colleague recently assured me that when looking to present this kind of approach to students, mine was still the work she turned to. In relation to psychology, I would say that the biggest impact has been in relation to the development of psychosocial approaches. **While** there has been some

attempt to develop what we might call a 'visual psychology', what is important, **I think**, is the way in which the analysis of the film text and action works alongside the discourse and action of the audience, and **how** this in turn is worked through the actual affective response of the researcher. I see this as crucial, and **it** has not yet been sufficiently developed **yet** within psychosocial studies or within qualitative or feminist approaches to psychology.

CS: Many people have noted the form of 'annotated transcription' you used in this piece to deal with the material. Have you continued to use it, or developed it further?

VW: Yes, indeed I have. In more recent work on children playing video games (Walkerdine, 2007), in order to understand the relationship between what children were doing and game action, it was absolutely essential to use the same kind of annotated and double transcription. In this case, we are not simply dealing with an 'audience' but with interactive media. **In this** kind of **research**, I view this way of working as essential and I hope others might develop it further.

CS: There is a place in the paper where you describe two analytic movements, forwards and backwards, that you are trying to put together. I've always thought this was a really helpful formulation. Does it describe how you work now?

VW: Yes, profoundly. I believe that we cannot understand current relations and practices without **analysing** both how they work in the present and how they have a history in which they are produced. If we leave that backwards and forwards movement we are in danger of collapsing the complexity of subjectivity and practices into readings which are too essentialist. In that passage, I give the example of domestic practices which might be the result of the historical experience of poverty and contain defences against poverty, even though poverty is no longer an issue. In my present work on the effects of the closure of a steel works in south Wales on the local community, this understanding is absolutely central to my work. I am arguing that we cannot understand how people's reactions are constituted in the present unless we engage with the historical experience of iron and steel production and the chronic insecurities it created over **200** years. In the case of '**Video Replay**', I was **pointing** to the fact that signifiers are inscribed and produced in the present and have a history in which

the subject is inscribed, thus attempting to open up a post-Lacanian dynamic beyond Saussurian linguistics towards history. At that time, **I was trying** to bring together Foucauldian-inspired work with psychoanalysis. Today, I am also very interested not only in what is signified but also in what is not, cannot be said, is felt in the body. I think this opens us up to understanding a more complex backwards and forwards movement.

CS: In relation to Cathy Urwin's arguments: what do you think of her comments about the place of femininities in this situation?

VW: I think her arguments are extremely interesting and important. The way in which she notices the domestic situation and the place of the women, the cakes and the sense of mirroring, as in blood and jam, are quite profound. I suggest that this really develops the whole analysis and allows us to understand it even more richly. I have often found it to be the case that telling the story of the women is **crucial, even though it is** much harder to see at first glance. I am most grateful to Cathy for pointing this out so clearly. '**Video Replay**' was my first attempt to do anything like this and, as Cathy Urwin makes clear, there is a whole observational tradition within Object Relations psychoanalysis which utilises the central significance of observer affect and pays particular attention to noting the complex dynamics. **A dialogue** with this tradition of work can only serve to strengthen and extend the tradition of research I was trying to develop.

CS: What would your response be to Urwin's speculations about the relevance of 'Video Replay' to contemporary media forms, particularly in the arena of reality television?

VW: There is, of course, a great deal of work on reality television, but what is important about what Cathy is saying is the way in which the shows actively mobilize the voting power of the audience. We are no longer in the situation of simply watching *Rocky*, but are in the position to influence who can BE Rocky. Just as I developed this way of thinking and working in my research on children playing video games, of course there is real opportunity to develop a great deal by utilizing such an approach with current interactive modes of audience participation. It is the mobilization of fantasy and the place of this fantasy in itself producing a complex real/fantasy outcome, which is very significant, and **which**

deserves to be developed in research terms. One can imagine exactly the kind of work **that would do this**, which could indeed involve being with a family, group or individual watching such a programme.

CS: Candida Yates suggests in relation to this paper that film has some particular qualities that mobilise affect; what do you think about this?

VW: I absolutely agree that film has particular qualities that mobilize affect. However, I also think that such an **ability** is not restricted to film, but **belongs** to all media forms, new and old. It is precisely the ways in which the media is able to engage us in and through affective responses, which is particularly significant. In my work on children playing video games, affect is certainly mobilized in the fantasy aspects of playing the game. I agree that it is this mobilization of affect which we need to understand as **it** allows us to engage with how we are 'touched' by **the** media forms and practices that we encounter.

CS: What do you think of Yates's interest in exploring 'earlier' psychodynamic aspects of the situation addressed in 'Video Replay'?

VW: The use of object relations approaches to understand a media object as a transitional one is very interesting indeed. Candy mentions both Winnicott and Bollas. Work using Winnicott in this respect has concentrated on the uses of creativity and play and thus how the media object functions in relation to the fantasized independence of children from the domestic space of the mother. I think this is very interesting and brings us round **in** another way to Urwin's remarks about the domestic situation and the role of women in *Rocky*. In addition, **Bollas's writing** on objects in 'Being a character' is work that I find deeply suggestive **when he tries** to make us understand the role of objects in creating ourselves as a character through them. I warmly welcome both these developments, but I would want to keep stressing the central significance of history and the backwards **and** forwards movement **in cultural analysis**. I would not want to reduce the complexity of the analysis to a developmental account or one which **saw** what you are calling 'early' relations **as** any kind of stage, which **would** take no account of the historical and cultural production of the forms and practices in which **such relations** exist and have meaning. I am not saying that Candy is doing this of course, but I just want to signal what is a cautionary issue

for me in all uses of psychoanalysis in cultural research.

CS: Sue Thornham gives a very comprehensive account of the paper's place within media and cultural studies. In the context of your own work, at the time and later on, how does this account sound?

VW: I think Sue's account is excellent and I learnt a great deal through reading it. I absolutely agree with how she situates that history. Now I can laugh at Shaun Moores' insistence that **my work** was all so impractical for ethnography, though I fear that such a sentiment is as rampant as it ever was in some circles. The attempt to develop feminist approaches to media audiences and the engagement with fantasy **did and can still** get rather polarized. I say this because what I think is required is not only a development of the methods as Cathy and Candy have argued, but also, and alongside that, a re-engagement with some central questions about subjectivity, which have certainly not disappeared. As **Sue** says, it is the questions around the complex relation between texts, readers, researchers, between fantasy and lived reality, between social category and cultural inscription, that still demand our urgent attention.

CS: Thornham also suggests that your own comments on 'Video Replay' subsequently have been rather qualified in their assessment of what the piece does. Do you agree?

VW: Well, I felt later that I was trying to do something that I didn't entirely know how to do. **I appreciate** how Sue tells us that she liked the fact that the object of study moved around all the time – from myself to **Dodo**, to Mr Cole, to Rocky, as of course, this is precisely how such processes work, through complex chains of association. I suppose that what I was responding to were the negative comments and my own sense that I needed to develop a more systematic approach. I think these feelings are well addressed by Cathy Urwin, who brings my work into dialogue with an established practice of psychoanalytic observation. However, after reading all of these wonderful commentaries, I feel rather proud of what I achieved by trying to insist on the need to do a certain kind of work in what was a quite hostile climate. It **has excited** me all over again with the desire to take this work forward and to engage with the really interesting comments made by Cathy, Candy and Sue. I cannot thank them enough.

CS: What are your contemporary feelings about the piece and its place within your and others' work?

VW: What I realize is that, although I had not actively thought about this article for **a long time**, many aspects of the way I approached it have become **second nature, absolutely** central to my own work. I am deeply grateful that there is a tradition of (mostly feminist) work which takes these issues seriously and continues to develop them and I really look forward to being part of that ongoing development and dialogue with renewed enthusiasm. The young girl who watched *Rocky II* with her family in 'Video Replay' is now in her 30s. I can't wait to take this work forward with her and her children's generation.

Reference

Walkerdine, V (2007) *Children, gender, video games: towards a relational approach to multimedia*, Houndsmills, Palgrave.